

Appendix 5

Economic Analysis Guidance

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Using the guidance found below, the Interagency Planning Group will evaluate all implementing actions to establish a prioritized ranking. In addition to examining the estimated economic cost/benefit analysis, implementing actions also must be ranked based on the impacts to the community or social structure of Bonneville County as a whole. The Guidance is included in the plan at this point simply to identify procedural steps necessary to establish implementation priorities.

Fire Mitigation Economic Analysis Guidance

Benefit/cost analysis is a key mechanism used by the Idaho State Bureau of Disaster Services, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and other state and federal agencies in evaluating wildfire mitigation projects, and is required by the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Public Law 93-288, as amended. This guide outlines several approaches for conducting economic analysis of wildfire mitigation projects. It describes the importance of implementing mitigation activities, different approaches to economic analysis of mitigation strategies, and methods to calculate costs and benefits associated with mitigation strategies. Information in this section is derived in part from: The Federal Emergency Management Agency Publication 331, Report on Costs and Benefits of Wildfire Mitigation.

This guide is not intended to provide a comprehensive description of benefit/cost analysis, nor is it intended to provide the details of economic analysis methods that can be used to evaluate local projects. It is intended to (1) raise benefit/cost analysis as an important issue, and (2) provide a description of how economic analysis will be used to evaluate fire mitigation implementing actions discussed in Section 5.

Mitigation Strategies

Mitigation activities reduce the cost of disasters by minimizing property damage, injuries, potential loss of life, and by reducing emergency response costs, which would otherwise be incurred. Evaluating wildfire mitigation provides decision-makers with an understanding of the potential benefits and costs of an activity, as well as a basis upon which to compare alternative projects.

Evaluating mitigation projects is a complex and difficult undertaking, which is influenced by many variables.

- ❑ Wildfires affect all segments of the communities they strike, including individuals, businesses, and public services such as fire, police, utilities, and schools.
- ❑ While some of the direct and indirect costs of disaster damages are measurable, some of the costs are non-financial and difficult to quantify in dollars.
- ❑ Many of the impacts of such events produce “ripple-effects” throughout the community, greatly increasing the disaster’s social and economic consequences.

While not easily accomplished, there is value, from a social and public policy perspective, in assessing the positive and negative impacts from mitigation activities, and obtaining an instructive benefit/cost comparison. Otherwise, the decision to pursue or not pursue various mitigation options would not be based on an objective understanding of the net benefit or loss associated with these actions.

Economic Analysis Approaches for Mitigation Strategies

The approaches used to identify the costs and benefits associated with wildfire mitigation strategies, measures, or projects fall into two general categories: benefit/cost analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis. The distinction between the two methods is the way in which the relative costs and benefits are measured. Additionally, there are several approaches to assessing the value of mitigation for public sector and private sector activities.

Benefit/cost Analysis

Benefit/cost analysis is used in wildfire mitigation to show if the benefits to life and property protected through mitigation efforts exceed the cost of the mitigation activity. Conducting benefit/cost analysis for a mitigation activity can assist communities in determining whether a project is worth undertaking now, in order to avoid disaster related damages later. Benefit/cost analysis is based on calculating the frequency and severity of a hazard, avoid future damages, and risk. In benefit/cost analysis, all costs and benefits are evaluated in terms of dollars, and a net benefit/cost ratio is computed to determine whether a project should be implemented (i.e., if net benefits exceed net costs, the project is worth pursuing). A project must have a benefit/cost ratio greater than 1 in order to be funded.

Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

Cost-effectiveness analysis evaluates how best to spend a given amount of money to achieve a specific goal. This type of analysis, however, does not necessarily measure costs and benefits in terms of dollars. Determining the economic feasibility of mitigating wildfire can also be organized according to the perspective of those with an economic interest in the outcome. Hence, economic analysis approaches are covered for both public and private sectors as follows.

Investing in public sector mitigation activities

Evaluating mitigation strategies in the public sector is complicated because it involves estimating all of the economic benefits and costs regardless of who realizes them, and potentially to a large number of people and economic entities. Some benefits cannot be evaluated monetarily, but still affect the public in profound ways. Economists have developed methods to evaluate the economic feasibility of public decisions that involve a diverse set of beneficiaries and non-market benefits.

Investing in private sector mitigation activities

A private sector mitigation project may occur on the basis of one of two approaches. It may be mandated by a regulation or standard, or it may be economically justified on its own merits. A building or landowner, whether a private entity or a public agency, required to conform to a mandated standard may consider the following options:

1. Request cost sharing from public agencies;
2. Dispose of the building or land either by sale or demolition;
3. Change the designated use of the building or land, and change the wildfire mitigation compliance requirement; or
4. Evaluate the most feasible alternatives, and initiate the most cost effective wildfire mitigation alternative.

The sale of a building or land triggers another set of concerns. For example, real estate disclosure laws can be developed which require sellers of real property to disclose known defects and deficiencies in the property, including earthquake weaknesses and hazards to prospective purchasers. Correcting deficiencies can be expensive and time consuming, but their existence can prevent the sale of the building. Conditions of a sale regarding the deficiencies and the price of the building can be negotiated between a buyer and seller.

Conducting Economic Analysis

Benefit/cost analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis are important tools in evaluating whether or not to implement a mitigation activity. The framework, which will be used for evaluating the Bonneville County Urban/Wildland Fire Mitigation Alternatives, is outlined below:

1. Identify the Alternatives

Alternatives for reducing risk from wildfires can include structural projects to enhance disaster resistance, education and outreach, and acquisition or demolition of exposed properties, among others. Different mitigation projects can assist in minimizing risk to wildfires, but do so at different economic costs.

2. Calculate the Costs and Benefits

Choosing economic criteria is essential to systematically calculating costs and benefits of mitigation projects and selecting the most appropriate alternative. Potential economic criteria to evaluate alternatives include:

❑ Determine the project cost

This may include initial project development costs, and repair and operating costs of maintaining projects over time.

❑ Estimate the benefits.

Projecting the benefits or cash flow resulting from a project can be difficult. Expected future returns from the mitigation effort depend on the correct specification of the risk and the effectiveness of the project, which may not be well known. Expected future costs depend on the physical durability and potential economic obsolescence of the investment. This is difficult to project. Estimating the costs and benefits of a hazard mitigation strategy can be a complex process. Employing the services of a specialist can assist in this process. These considerations will also provide guidance in selecting an appropriate salvage value. Future tax structures and rates must be projected. Financing alternatives must be researched, and they may include retained earnings, bond and stock issues, and commercial loans.

❑ Consider costs and benefits to society and the environment

These are not easily measured, but can be assessed through a variety of economic tools including existence value or contingent value theories. These theories provide quantitative data on the value that people attribute to physical or social environments. Even without hard data, however, impacts of structural projects to the physical environment or to society should be considered when implementing mitigation projects.

❑ Determine the correct discount rate

Determination of the discount rate can just be the risk-free cost of capital, but it may include the decision maker's time preference and also a risk premium. Inflation factors also should be considered.

3. Analyze and Rank the Alternatives

Once costs and benefits have been quantified, economic analysis tools can rank the alternatives. Two methods for determining the best alternative given different costs and benefits include net present value and internal rate of return.

Net present value

The net present value is the value of the expected future returns of an investment minus the value of expected future cost expressed in today's dollars. If the net present value is greater than the project costs, the project may be determined feasible for implementation. Selecting the discount rate, and identifying the present and future costs and benefits of the project, calculates the net present value of projects.

Internal Rate of Return

Using the internal rate of return method to evaluate mitigation projects provides the interest rate equivalent to the dollar returns expected from the project. Once the rate has been calculated, it can be compared to rates earned by investing in alternative projects. Projects may be feasible to implement when the internal rate of return is greater than the total costs of the project. Once the mitigation projects are ranked on the basis of economic criteria, decision-makers can consider other factors such as risk, project effectiveness, and economic, environmental, and social returns in choosing the appropriate project for implementation.

Calculating Economic Benefits of Mitigation

The estimation of economic returns, which accrue to building or landowner's because of wildfire mitigation, is difficult. Owners evaluating the economic feasibility of mitigation should consider reductions in physical damages and financial losses. A partial list follows:

- ☐ Building damages avoided
- ☐ Content damages avoided
- ☐ Inventory damages avoided
- ☐ Rental income losses avoided
- ☐ Relocation and disruption expenses avoided
- ☐ Proprietor's income losses avoided

These parameters can be estimated using observed prices, costs, and engineering data. The difficult part is to correctly determine the effectiveness of the wildfire mitigation project and the resulting reduction in damages and losses. Equally as difficult is assessing the probability that an event will occur. The damages and losses should only include those that will be borne by the owner. The salvage value of the investment can be important in determining economic feasibility. Salvage value becomes more important over the life of the assets. This is important because most businesses depreciate assets over a period of time.

Additional Costs from Wildfires

Property owners should also assess changes in a broader set of factors that can change as a result of a large wildfire. These are usually termed "indirect" effects, but they can have a very direct effect on the economic value of the owner's building or land. They can be positive or negative, and include changes in the following:

- ☐ Commodity and resource prices
- ☐ Availability of resource supplies
- ☐ Commodity and resource demand changes
- ☐ Building and land values
- ☐ Capital availability and interest rates
- ☐ Availability of labor
- ☐ Economic structure
- ☐ Infrastructure
- ☐ Regional exports and imports
- ☐ Local, state, and national regulations and policies
- ☐ Insurance availability and rates

Changes in the resources and industries listed above are more difficult to estimate, and require models that are structured to estimate total economic impacts. Total economic impacts are the sum of direct and indirect economic impacts. Total economic impact models usually are not combined with economic feasibility models. Many models exist to estimate total economic impacts of changes in an economy. Decision-makers should understand the total economic impacts of natural disasters in order to calculate the benefits of a mitigation activity. This suggests that understanding the local economy is an important first step in being able to understand the potential impacts of a disaster, and the benefits of mitigation activities.

Additional Considerations

Conducting an economic analysis for potential mitigation activities can assist decision-makers in choosing the most appropriate strategy for their community to reduce risk and prevent loss from wildfires. Economic analysis can also save time and resources from being spent on inappropriate or non-feasible projects. Benefit/cost analysis is complicated, and the numbers may divert attention from other important issues. It is important to consider the qualitative factors of a project associated with mitigation that cannot be evaluated economically.

There are alternative approaches to implementing mitigation projects. Many communities are looking toward developing multi-objective projects. With this in mind, opportunity rises to develop strategies that integrate wildfire mitigation with projects related to watersheds, environmental planning, community economic development, and small business development, among others. Incorporating wildfire mitigation with other community projects can increase the viability of project implementation.